ThoughtCo.

ThoughtCo.

Divide Africa

The Colonization of the Continent by European Powers

SHARE FLIP EMAIL PRINT

Adalbert von Rößler (†1922)/Wikimedia Commons/Public Domain

By Matt Rosenberg
Updated on May 08, 2025

Key Takeaways

The Berlin Conference divided Africa into new boundaries, ignoring existing cultures and communities.

The conference disregarded African cultural and linguistic boundaries, causing long-term political fragmentation.

The Berlin Conference was described by Harm J. de Bli in "Geography: Realms, Regions, and Concepts:"

"The Berlin Conference was Africa's undoing in more ways than one. The colonial powers superimposed their domains on the African continent. By the time independence returned to Africa in 1950, the realm had acquired a legacy of political fragmentation that could neither be eliminated nor made to operate satisfactorily."

Purpose of the Berlin Conference

In 1884, at the request of Portugal, German chancellor Otto von Bismark called together the major Western powers of the world to negotiate questions and end confusion over the control of Africa. Bismark appreciated the opportunity to expand Germany's sphere of influence over Africa and hoped to force Germany's rivals to struggle with one another for territory.

At the time of the Berlin Conference, 80 percent of Africa remained under traditional and local control. What ultimately resulted was a hodgepodge of geometric boundaries that divided Africa into 50 irregular countries. This new map of the continent was superimposed over 1,000 indigenous cultures and regions of Africa. The new countries lacked rhyme or reason and divided coherent groups of people and merged disparate groups who did not get along.

Map depicting the colonization of Africa after the Berlin Conference

ThoughtCo / Adrian Mangel

Countries Represented at the Berlin Conference

Fourteen countries were represented by a plethora of ambassadors when the Berlin Conference opened in Germany on November 15, 1884. The countries represented at the time included Austria-Hungary, Belgium, Denmark, France, Germany, Great Britain, Italy, the Netherlands, Portugal, Russia, Spain, Sweden-Norway (unified from 1814 to 1905), Turkey, and the United States of America. Of these 14 nations, France, Germany, Great Britain, and Portugal were the major players in the Berlin Conference, controlling most of colonial Africa at the time.

Berlin Conference Tasks

The initial task of the Berlin Conference was to agree that the Congo River and Niger River mouths and basins would be considered neutral and open to trade. Despite its neutrality, part of the Congo Basin became a personal kingdom for Belgium's King Leopold II. Under his rule, over half of the region's population died.

At the time, only the coastal areas of Africa were colonized by the European powers. At the Berlin Conference, the European colonial powers scrambled to gain control over the interior of the continent. The conference lasted until February 26, 1885—a three-month period where colonial powers haggled over geometric boundaries in the interior of the continent, disregarding the cultural and linguistic boundaries already established by the indigenous African population.

Following the Berlin Conference, the give and take continued. By 1914, the conference participants had fully divided Africa among themselves into 50

Great Britain desired a Cape-to-Cairo collection of colonies and almost succeeded through their control of Egypt, Sudan (Anglo-Egyptian Sudan), Uganda, Kenya (British East Africa), South Africa, Zambia, Zimbabwe (Rhodesia), and Botswana. The British also controlled Nigeria and Ghana (Gold Coast).

France took much of western Africa, from Mauritania to Chad (French West Africa), as well as Gabon and the Republic of Congo (French Equatorial Africa).

Belgium and King Leopold II controlled the Democratic Republic of Congo (Belgian Congo).

Portugal took Mozambique in the east and Angola in the west.

Italy's holdings were Somalia (Italian Somaliland) and a portion of Ethiopia.

Germany took Namibia (German Southwest Africa) and Tanzania (German East Africa).

Spain claimed the smallest territory, which was Equatorial Guinea (Rio Muni).

Source

De Bli, Harm J. "Geography: Realms, Regions, and Concepts." Peter O. Muller, Jan Nijman, 16th Edition, Wiley, November 25, 2013.

Cite this Article

A Congolese army soldier lays on the ground at the front line, November 12, 2008 in the outskirts of the town of Goma, Democratic Republic of the Congo.

Map of the world showing core, semi-periphery, periphery, and others in different colors.

Core and Periphery, Two Types That Make the World

Belgium Colonialism

Flag of South Africa Painted on Two Hands

Congresso Nacional, Brasilia, Brazil

Royal Danish Air Force F-16 fighters

Capital City Relocation

NATO Member Countries

Pangong Lake, Jammu and Kashmir

African Union Building, Addis Ababa, Ethiopia

The 10 Most Unusual International Borders

African Union

American Embassy under construction in London.

A map of landlocked countries

What's the Difference Between an Embassy and a Consulate?

Landlocked Countries Without Direct Ocean Access

Mason Dixon Line marker

The Great Pyramids of Cheops, Chephren and Mycerinus in Giza, Egypt, are a UNESCO world heritage site.

ThoughtCo.

program

Science, Tech, Math

Humanities

Languages

Resources

About Us

Advertise

Careers

Privacy Policy

Editorial Guidelines

Contact

Terms of Service

Your Privacy Choices

Dotdash meredith

ThoughtCo is part of the Dotdash Meredith publishing family.

Commonwealth of Nations

Countries With Multiple Capital Cities